

CAN XUE'S SPATIALIZED VISION: BUILDINGS AND THE EXPLORATION OF  
THE SOUL

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis centers on the question of how the representation of buildings opens up possibilities for investigating Can Xue's fiction as literature with universal concern about humanity. It explores the significance of Can Xue's employment of buildings in her works from three aspects. The first aspect regards buildings as the reflection of the structure of the soul. The second aspect situates buildings in their relationship with residents and explores the connection between the buildings/residents relationship and that of body and soul. The last aspect sees buildings as the microcosmic projection of Can Xue's fictional space. This study places textual constitution at the center of investigation through the approach of close textual analysis. It marks an attempt to reconsider the method of literary investigation in the field of modern Chinese literature which has been dominated by cultural and historical approaches.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Can Xue has been noted for her distinctive style among contemporary Chinese writers. Her fiction is often captured by scholars as a surrealist dreamscape that is constituted by fragmentary storylines, bizarre characters, and sensational depiction in eerie details. The logic guiding Can Xue's fantastic fictional space is commonly seen as beyond the mode of reasoning that governs our world of experience. This condition seems to make her literary space a self-contained entity that resists deconstruction. Most critics thus resort to the external physical reality in search for an interpretive strategy<sup>1</sup>. However, that many scholars have maintained the scope of their investigation within a socio-historical perspective does not exclude the possibility that Can Xue's works can be comprehended from within. What is at stake in this trend of thinking is the relevance of literary aesthetics and its philosophical contemplation of humanity to the study of literature. The thesis thus provides a departure from existing research on Can Xue's fiction and initiates an act of probing introspectively into Can Xue's literary construction to examine the texts on their own terms. The approach of the thesis deviates from existing approaches to Can Xue's works which distracts attention away from the aesthetics of the fictions themselves as literature that expresses a concern for universal humanity. The

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Xiaobin Yang's discussion about Can Xue's traumatic response to the Cultural Revolution, "Can Xue: Ever-Haunting Nightmares" (74-92) in *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction*; Ban Wang, "The Sublime Subject of History and Desublimation in Contemporary Chinese Fiction." *Comparative Literature* 47 (1995): 330-353, in which he describes Can Xue as part of the trend to desubliminate the sublime discourse that has been constructed in the Maoist era. An overview of major critical discussions on Can Xue will be introduced later in this chapter.

thesis will turn the gaze inward to examine how Can Xue uses her fiction as a tool for reaching deep into the soul, through which the motif of buildings plays a significant role.

One crucial element in her fiction is the buildings, which appear frequently in her story and contribute significantly to her literary construction of a fantastic fictional space. These buildings usually feature spatial and temporal distortion, signs of life, such as capability of slight movement, and obsessive residents who behave suspiciously in a similar way as if in collusion. The role of the buildings is more than a composite of the fictional settings. They function as an organic part of Can Xue's art of fiction. The thesis is therefore devoted to the investigation the role of buildings as an important motif in supporting Can Xue's literary and philosophical exploration.

The emphasis on buildings is a conscious choice in Can Xue's writing. She may have developed a special awareness of space as a child and drawn inspiration from her childhood experience in writing. In one short autobiographical piece titled "Empty Rooms"<sup>2</sup>, Can Xue describes her fascination with three empty rooms upstairs in the two-story apartment building where she used to live. Although Can Xue does not mention the time in the piece, it could be inferred from the description of her fear of being captured by the ghosts or the secret agents jumping out from the empty rooms that the event most possibly took place in Can Xue's childhood. The structure of the building in "Empty Rooms" features a hallway with rooms lining up on the two sides on each floor. As Can Xue's friend lives on the second floor, she often goes upstairs to seek her friend despite the eerie atmosphere surrounding her friend's home and the vacant rooms. She is most

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<sup>2</sup> The article is included in Can Xue's collection of short stories and essays: *Dance of the Dark Soul: Can Xue's Self-Collection of Writings* 黑暗灵魂的舞蹈: 残雪美文自选集. See 148-150.

concerned with the three empty rooms at the end of the hallway. Occasionally, she sees people moving into the rooms; but they all disappear in two or three days, leaving the rooms locked up like no one ever lived there. One time Can Xue even hears some noise which sounds like the head of a huge bird bumping onto the wall from one of the empty rooms. In her frequent dreams about the rooms, a person or two are always sorting out the luggage in the dark in one room while in another room, a skinny girl with wet hair worn down is sitting leg-crossed in a chair, running her fingers through the pages in a picture book under the light of a lamp. When Can Xue enters the room, the girl speaks through a hoarse voice “I’m the old resident here!” “Empty Rooms” provides a look into Can Xue’s early psychological experience with unknown space. Can Xue resorts to dreaming to explore the space with her subconscious imagination, which is later transcribed into literary exploration through her fiction.

Can Xue’s employment of buildings as a thematic and aesthetic tool for literature is not unprecedented in literary history. The link between architecture and literature has been explicitly explored by Ellen Eve Frank in her book<sup>3</sup>, who proposes the theory of literary architecture based on the works of the British critic Walter Pater. She first traces the etymological origin of the word “building”, which means “to be, to exist, to grow”(4). When taking historical meaning into account, the word “building” takes on a metaphysical dimension. At the same time, the state of existence thus is accorded a structure, which transforms the abstract and complicated experience of being into a concrete construction of consciousness. Frank points out the spatial nature of human

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<sup>3</sup> *Literary Architecture: Essays Toward a Tradition: Walter Pater, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Marcel Proust, Henry James*. See Introduction in which she establishes the theoretical framework of literary architecture for details.

cognitive activities as she remarks that “Our experience as an activity of being—entering and moving through interior space, seeing wall-boundaries, looking through windows, feeling stress—is governed by and utilizes the architectural structures we perceive, as we perceive them”(4-5). She highlights the word “experience” as a term designating not only the general human activity of being but also the specific “critical inquiry, methodology, reading” in literary study (4). According to Frank, the basic act of perceiving is “seeing through space”(5). This could be taken further to imply that the essential activities constituting human experience of existence are based on spatial observation as Frank explains that although man and his environment all appear to be made of the similar materials that are or seemingly are spatial-temporal, man’s major difference from the world is that “he imagines his consciousness or experience to be bounded or located in particular space, within white walls, bodies, time, while what is outside his personal realm he imagines to be boundless as he thinks the universe is boundless, timeless as it is timeless”(6). Since consciousness is the fundamental structure of existence and the world experienced by humans is essentially subjective, it possesses both “spatial extension (architecture) in the physical world” and “the language of spatial extension (literature) in the world of thought”(7). Frank thus conceives a connection between architecture and literature. By connection, Frank does not mean a single bridge over the distance between the two conceptual realms, rather, she means the intricate building of relationships on all levels, which she terms as *literary architecture*. Frank’s notion of the connection, or literary architecture, is a transcribed mental process of establishing correspondence, or more exactly, conversion, between the two art forms. The means of achieving this conversion is construction (on the part of the writer) and deconstruction (on the part of

the reader) of the architectural analogues in the text. Her discussion of the literary analogy in specific literary works is interwoven with the issue of memory, mind, and the body.

As far as systematicity is concerned, Can Xue's principles have not taken the shape of a literary theory. But inspecting her ideas of literature and humanity could provide a valuable look into her artistic outlook, which is reflected in her fiction as of central concern. Can Xue is a writer with introspective vision. She defines the mission of literature as the pursuit for self-knowledge<sup>4</sup> (*Dance of the Dark Soul* 215). According to Can Xue, pure literature, a term which she used to designate her writing, should be judged by the spiritual depth it achieves in its exploration of the human soul<sup>5</sup> (205). She interprets purity as depth, which entails darkness and implies breadth and liberty. Writers of pure literature engage themselves in transcending the world of experience to explore the boundless realm of the soul. Can Xue's philosophical contemplation of literature is thus interlinked with her understanding of human spirituality.

Can Xue delineates a space in her fiction for spiritual activities through verbalization. She describes her purpose in writing as attempting to transform the sealed pure space of the spirit which refuses any ties to the real world into an open space for the actualization of human possibilities (199). In a sense, Can Xue visualizes her works as a vertical

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<sup>4</sup> See Can Xue, "Great Works in My Heart" (我心目中的伟大作品) 215-218, *Dance of the Dark Soul*. She says, "Isn't literature the advanced human activity for the pursuit of self-knowledge?" (215)

<sup>5</sup> In her critical essays on literature, Can Xue uses the terms 灵魂 *linghun*(soul), 精神 *jingshen*(spirit), and 心灵 *xinling*(heart/mind) to designate the incorporeal existence of human beings as opposed to their physical existence. See essays in chapters "Unconventional Realm"(异端境界) and "Eternal Traveling"(永恒的漂泊), *Dance of the Dark Soul*.

connection between the corporeal reality and the immaterial spiritual sphere, through which her readers might enter and join her exploration into the depth. Furthermore, Can Xue often accentuates the concept of *spatial gradation* (层次 cengci)<sup>6</sup> as an important property of things. She conceptualizes the language of the literature of the soul as having spatial levels that map onto its signified objects. This process of “mirroring” represents the outside world inside the space of the mind. Can Xue summarizes her stories as retelling the same story of the soul, the world beyond, and the kingdom of art in different ways (192)<sup>7</sup>. She conceives the story of the soul as three-dimensional, through which the reader can be taken deeper and deeper down to the core. In Can Xue’s view, in order to be able to understand and respond to the portrait of the soul in this kind of fiction, the reader has to possess the potential to have his or her soul structurally triggered by the writing. Readers and the writer are thus aligned on the same side of the explorer, cooperating for the same course of spiritual exploration.

Buildings in Can Xue’s fiction are what Frank identifies as architectural analogy for achieving the correspondence between language and architecture, consciousness and the physical world. Can Xue’s conception of pure literature as a spatialized connection between the spiritual world and the corporeal reality is related to some extent to Frank’s idea that the perceptual activity of literary architecture bridges the gap between literature as “language of spatial extension” in the world of thought and architecture as the “actual spatial extension” in physical world. The two both highlight a spot of transformation and

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<sup>6</sup> The Chinese word 层次 is used by Can Xue to refer to certain scaled structure that can be approached step by step towards the core. Here in the thesis 层次 is translated as “structure.”

<sup>7</sup> See “Dance of the Dark Soul” 190-193, *Dance of the Dark Soul*.

correspondence between the seemingly incompatible spaces as their loci of exploration. Nevertheless, pure literature in Can Xue's contemplation is more of the static locus where the confliction between the two exclusive worlds and the adventure for spiritual depth are condensed. While Frank also lifts her conception to an ontological level, her idea of literary architecture is more consciously leaned toward a process of building correspondence and performing conversion as a method for marrying the two arts on an aesthetic level. As Frank notes that "Writers who select architecture as their art analogue dematerialize the more material art, architecture, that they may materialize the more immaterial art, literature" (7). Her emphasis is placed on the conversion between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. Although both of the two aim to bring the intangible into contact with the tangible, Frank is more concerned with the significance of the artistic union between the two art forms, literature and architecture; while Can Xue is more engaged in the architectural construction of literary space as the philosophical site of tension between the two dimensions of being, the spiritual and the corporeal.

Can Xue's buildings are more than physical constructions for human dwelling. They echo her spatialized framing of her fictional world and her thematic concerns. The thesis will revolve around three aspects of the significance of Can Xue's employment of buildings, which will be discussed respectively in the following three independent chapters.

The first significance lies in the metaphorical space of buildings as the mirror image of the structure of the soul<sup>8</sup>. As a result of Can Xue's spatialized vision, the structure of

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<sup>8</sup> Can Xue elaborates the idea of the structure of the soul in her essay "Structure of the Spirit"(精神的层次), 219-222, *Dance of the Dark Soul*.

pure literature is perceived as possessing a certain universal structure which echoes the mental structure of people's mind. This structure of the soul is innate to everyone across cultures, which enables the possibility of communication through literature across linguistic and national boundaries. However, not everyone is able to see the internal structure by his or her own strength. Can Xue places part of the task of reproducing the original image of spiritual structure on pure literature. She deems that the fundamental structure of various works of pure literature is the same. Readers have to figure out the basic structure of a work to be able to grasp the meaning of the work, during the process of which the structure of their own souls will surface and enlighten them in the pursuit of the essential state of the soul. Buildings in Can Xue's fiction symbolize this distinctive structure within the text, which mirrors the structure of readers' soul on the outside. The chapter will argue that characteristics of these buildings resemble the idiosyncrasies of the psyche. It will discuss the apartment buildings in "Life Course"(历程 *licheng*)<sup>9</sup> to investigate how the story engages itself in the issue of memory and the split and multiplication of the self through the construction of buildings.

The second aspect involves the relationship between buildings and people and how the relationship reflects Can Xue's concern of the dialectics of the body/soul relationship. Can Xue centralizes the dichotomy between the body and the spirit as the conflict between primitive instincts and reason in her discussion of literature. The body accommodates the activities of the soul while confining it with corporeal desires. Much as she privileges the spirit over the body, Can Xue admits that human beings cannot live

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<sup>9</sup> The novella is included in *Can Xue's Self-Collection*(残雪自选集), 2004.

completely within the spirit since the body is the dark place where the soul was born (187). Can Xue often wrote about people exploring a strange house or an apartment building and becoming trapped in it. The image of the protagonist wandering and searching in an unusual building evokes the figurative picture of the soul roaming within the boundary of the body, looking for an exit to its bewilderment caused by the physical constraints of the body. On the other hand, the relationship between the body and the soul can be the reverse. Can Xue's self-reflection goes beyond merely capturing the conflicts internalized within a human being. She seeks to intensify the conflicts by mobilizing the soul against the body. She urges art to push the limits of the corporeal through negating and punishing the body with the rationality of the soul<sup>10</sup>. The more force in the body rebounding, the freer the literary expression (187). Following this logic, Can Xue interprets Kafka's castle as the incarnation of the will of the soul. The relationship between the protagonist K and the castle reflects the conflict between the body and the soul, instinct and reason. In this light, Can Xue's buildings can be the signifier of both the soul and its dwelling. The third chapter will analyze how the relationship between people and buildings is illustrated in short stories such as "In the Wilderness"(旷野里 *kuangye li*)<sup>11</sup> and what the body and soul relationship constructed through buildings in Can Xue's fiction reveals about her vision of humanity.

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<sup>10</sup> See "A Special Kind of Stories"(一种特殊的小说) 186-189, *Dance of the Dark Soul*. Also see 199, "About *The Last Lover*: Some Words for the Reader" in the same book, in which she specifies human spiritual activities as a series of experiments to test the capacity of the body: "在某种意义上来说, 人的精神活动就是由接连不断的实验构成的。即, 试一试自己这僵硬的肉体还有多大的能动性..."

<sup>11</sup> The story is included in the short story collection *A Dreamscape that Has Never been Described* 从未描述过的梦境, 2004.

The last aspect of significance rests in how buildings serve as allegories of Can Xue's perspective on writing and readership and how they constitute her defense and governance of her literary space. The plot of people visiting or entering by accident some mysterious buildings occurs frequently in her fiction. Can Xue emphasizes the act of intruding by accident (闯入 *chuangru*)<sup>12</sup> as the method for the potential reader to probe deep into her fiction. This echoes the way characters in her fiction enter the buildings. She thus conceives her fictional space within the framework of her fictional buildings. Under this conception, Can Xue's expectation for potential readers to join her spiritual exploration is transcribed into her fiction, in which the owner of a building is always there waiting for the protagonist to walk into his space. The last chapter will illustrate this aspect primarily through the short story: "The Journey Back Home"(归途 *guitu*)<sup>13</sup>.

Can Xue's style can be generally contextualized in the Chinese avant-garde movement during the 1980s. As mainstream literature in mainland China has become increasingly entrenched in the performance of power, a number of writers begin to explore a different path from the pragmatic and ideologically charged approach in literary creation<sup>14</sup>. The avant-garde school seeks to go beyond various concerns with the material world by experimenting with unconventional styles and contents that exhibit strong individual characteristics. Can Xue's peculiarity in writing thus can be understood in

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<sup>12</sup> See 191 "Dance of the Dark Soul," *Dance of the Dark Soul*, in which Can Xue uses the word 闯入 to describe the act of breaking into her fiction: "它表面上没有结构, 不合逻辑, 内部却有隐藏得很深的结构与逻辑, 读者必须运用创造力去'闯入', 才能发现它们。"

<sup>13</sup> The story is included in *Dance of the Dark Soul*.

<sup>14</sup> See 124-136, Wu Liang, "Re-Membering the Cultural Revolution: Chinese Avant-garde Literature of the 1980s," *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey*. Ed. Chi, Pang-Yuan, and David De-Wei Wang. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

terms of this literary movement. But just as Wu Liang puts it, “A characteristic of avant-garde literature is that it arose from the memory of history and yet went beyond historical judgment; it raised questions about human existence and yet refrained from becoming involved in contemporary life”(128 Wu), Can Xue’s writing, despite being conditioned by its period, deserves investigation not just as a particular subject of specific social and cultural discursive construction.

The following paragraphs introduce the critical context of existing scholarship on Can Xue. The discussion revolves around the issue of how to interpret Can Xue’s distinctive style. As I have argued, the approach of recent studies on Can Xue differs from that of this thesis. Although recent critical examinations offer insights into Can Xue’s unconventional manner of literary expression, they neglect the merits of the capacity of the texts to stand on their own as literature transcending historical contexts. As a result, the particular textual constitution of the texts has not been accorded enough close examination. This tendency runs the risk of reducing her works to a vague sketch of settings, main characters, and plots in literary analysis.

Can Xue’s style is often characterized as highly elusive, irrational, and imaginative. Her fiction deviates from literary conventions that stress the totality of narration and the link between representation and reality. Scholarly discussions of Can Xue’s works tend to linger around the concerns with reality. Her fiction is thus seen as either exhibiting total indifference and negation of external reality or implying an internalized and dramatized response to the insanity of China’s historical reality and the discourse central to that reality.

The former view suggests the impossibility of forming a coherent realist and aesthetic reading of Can Xue. In the words of one critic<sup>15</sup>, she “has no master and does not yield any master signifiers” and her “fictional body is anarchy itself” since “No law governs it, not even its owner, and certainly not nature” (Hout 30-31). Such a view not only denies any intrinsic value in Can Xue’s works but also simplifies their dialogue with the real world as merely “resistance against culture and language”(29). Further investigation of the composition of these works thus is dismissed as superfluous and insignificant.

On the other hand, the second view of her works regards Can Xue’s incoherent style as grounded in Chinese social and historical reality. Xiaobin Yang interprets Can Xue’s elusiveness as an inability to speak coherently of her traumatic memory of the Cultural Revolution during which rationality was replaced by the absurdity of Maoist discourse. Can Xue’s fragmentary and paranoid narrative thus effectively captures the ethos of the period. Meanwhile, Ban Wang places Can Xue’s into the category of schizophrenic writing that employs the concept of schizophrenic as a critical tool to deconstruct and thus desublimates the Chinese discourse of the sublime constructed through political and ideological manipulation. As Wang puts it, “Instead of being chained to a unifying totality and narrative outside the body and to an autonomous self within, the unconscious flow and the bodily impulses in the schizophrenic can ‘deterritorialize’ or deconstruct what has been rigidly defined as Nation, Family, Church, School, Party” (342). This line of reasoning carries further the idea that Can Xue’s works signify a gesture of resistance

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<sup>15</sup> See chapter 1, Huot, *China’s New Cultural Scene: A Handbook of Changes*, 2000.

and renders them as more aggressively engaged in subverting the Maoist discourse constructs.

As Tonglin Lu observes from a gender perspective that Can Xue's status of being an exception to the literature dictated by patriarchal order has become a point for criticism, she interprets Can Xue's marginality as a result of her attempt to undermine the Chinese traditional patriarchal discourse without identifying herself closely with femininity<sup>16</sup>. This isolates both conventional readers and those who are interested in gender. Lu deems that the value of Can Xue's works lies not in the madness but instead in its lucidity in that the writings "capture the reality of contemporary China through a 'feminized' language"<sup>17</sup>(180). So Lu meditates Can Xue's style against a masculinized tradition and understands the absence of master signifier in Can Xue's language as an advantage of fluidity as opposed to the rigidly structured patriarchal language. Can Xue's employment of fluidity is thus considered by Lu as "an excellent tool for exploring the nightmarish situation in contemporary Chinese society"(180).

Dai Jinhua advocates for a socially grounded interpretation of Can Xue that compensates for the negligence of the social aspect of Can Xue's works in Chinese academia during the 1980s. She understands Can Xue's fictional world as a microcosm of a kind of generalized social power struggle that is not necessarily specific to certain time

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<sup>16</sup> See chapter "Can Xue: What is so Paranoid in Her Writing," *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society*, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Lu describes Can Xue's language as relatively "feminized" when she places Can Xue against the literary field that is dominated by writers whose works follow the patriarchal establishment of literary conventions. For example, she says, "Love in Can Xue's story can occur only in a fluid world of female subjectivity. This specificity of love deliberately marks a refusal to provide the male subject with a firm ground for its solidification by means of sexuality. In her world of transformation, the father's logic is absent"(194).

period or place<sup>18</sup>. Her reading reveals a desperate world that is permeated with antagonistic emotions and actions and where mutual persecution is normalized and no redemption can be expected. Although Dai Jinhua's analysis replaces the specific historical background of the Cultural Revolution which scholars tend to fit Can Xue's works into with a general context of human micro-political struggle, she still conceives her contextualization in relation to the lingering influence of the earlier period of the Cultural Revolution on the daily lives in the 1980s.

In Rong Cai's analysis, although she investigates the plagued self in its persisting battle with the Other, the emphasis is still placed on decoding the debilitating relationship into the subjective experience of the absurdity of reality<sup>19</sup>. Much as she contends that "by turning antagonism between the self and the Other into an existential pattern, Can Xue reveals a metaphysical truth of life beyond Mao's China," (93) Rong Cai's investigation is confined to the discussion of how the seeming absurdity in Can Xue's fiction responds to the social conditions of the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. The antagonism between self and Other is explored in relation to the general external context rather than the finer internal process. Under this conception, the self is simplified as a passive reacting agent against its environment. Can Xue's intense spiritual outlook that values the full complexity of the mind is not accorded enough attention in this kind of reading.

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<sup>18</sup> See 286-293 in *The Boat Wading across the Water: Chinese Women's Writing and Women's Culture in the New Age* (涉渡之舟：新时期中国女性写作与女性文化). Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> See "In the Madding Crowd: Self and Other in Can Xue's Fiction," *The Subject Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 2004.

Jon Solomon contextualizes Can Xue's resistance in a global frame of post-colonialism<sup>20</sup>. He locates Can Xue's effort in a broad trend of Chinese intellectuals' "reluctance to find a voice that could resist the hopeless dialectic movement between East and West and a formation of a putatively unified subjectivity implicated therein" ("Taking Tiger Mountain" 238). Solomon's dissection of the problematic of the subjectivity represented in Can Xue's short story "Skylight" in relation to Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q"<sup>21</sup> reveals an act of resistance in Can Xue's work against the unified subjectivity constructed by both the Maoist and the colonialist discourses.

Generally speaking, Can Xue's distinctive style is comprehended by critics as a mechanism for coping with Chinese reality and its discourses. These analyses all rely invariably on a heightened awareness for the external context that envelopes the interiority of the text and informs its composition. Whether a boundary truly exists between text and physical world begs our question as our perception is inevitably confined to what may be observed from the interior. Although history also is, in essence, a subjective construction, it should not be the sole reference for literary analysis. Over-historicizing will only reduce the distinctiveness of literature as a world in itself while being more than itself. Therefore, the thesis will strive to open an alternative to what has already been explored.

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<sup>20</sup> See Solomon's article in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Solomon interprets Ah Q's execution at the end of "The True Story of Ah Q" as a representation of the execution of national subjectivity by Western imperialism. His discussion relates the breakdown of national subjectivity in "The True Story of Ah Q" to Can Xue's deconstructive use of monologism. See 249-250.



## CHAPTER II

### BUILDINGS AS THE REFLECTION OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE SOUL

In her article “The Structure of the Spirit,” Can Xue accords pure literature the mission of unveiling the exquisite structure of the spiritual realm, which is based on the conception that incorporeal spirit could be perceived through spatial structures. Can Xue sees the development of literature and the complication of the soul in a convoluted process of interaction. As she remarks, “by the time when the complicated spiritual world appeared in a three-dimensional form, literature began its official specialization into different fields” the field of pure literature was born in the process of exploring the invisible spiritual realm by a group of writers who are discontent with the superficial peripheral structure of the mind and aim to delve into the depth<sup>22</sup> (*Dance of the Dark Soul* 219). Can Xue thus assumes that the capacity of the mind to present itself in three-dimensional structure is a marker of acquiring a higher level of intelligence in the evolutionary process of human intellect. She attributes the clear structuring of the soul which we observe today to the successful development in science and in the in-depth quest into the human mind<sup>23</sup>. In Can Xue’s view, spatialization therefore is clearly an indication of sophistication; being able to grow in more than two directions into planes and branches is a signifier of infinite possibilities and potential. It is through this metaphorical abstraction of the neurological development of the human brain that Can Xue invests an expectation for literature. The soul’s possession of a structure not only is a

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<sup>22</sup> Here Can Xue is commenting generally on the overall course of the development of human civilization. See “Structure of the Spirit”(精神的层次).

<sup>23</sup> See 219 *Dance of the Dark Soul*.

proof of its dynamic existence, but also is a confirmation that the incorporeal consciousness could be captured by art, the abstractional tool for human intellect to contemplate beyond what is physically present. This promise enables the process of what Frank identifies as the materialization of immaterial consciousness. For literature to deliver this process of the materialization of the immaterial soul, it has to devise an instrument to grasp the distinctiveness of the soul like a mental portrait.

Frank has traced the origin of the word *dwelling*, which derives from a word meaning “to rise in a cloud”(12). The etymological meaning of dwelling thus implies to make visible by giving form to something incorporeal. Frank’s investigation of dwelling therefore points to a solution: “Constructing a building is *bringing into being*; constructing a dwelling is bringing of being *into seeable form*”(12). Literary buildings become the promising instrument to realize the materialization of the spirit by inscribing the structure into clear seeable forms. Can Xue thus defines the works of a pure literature writer as “a representation of the spiritual structure”(Dance of the Dark Soul 205). To achieve this representation, Can Xue has to make her work almost a mirror that reflects the inner structure of the reader who is not able to see the structure from inside. The mirror image of the mind structure which literature contains takes the form of architecture in Can Xue’s work. She constructs various forms of fantastic buildings as dwelling places for her characters. This chapter analyzes how Can Xue’s literary buildings serve as reflections of the human psyche by incorporating the idiosyncrasies of the mind into their construction. It revolves around Can Xue’s novella “Life Course” as it penetratingly demonstrates how the mind is to be understood in terms of architectural constructs.

Can Xue's novella "Life Course" embodies her attempt to delve deep into the soul in the form of a critical reflection of life. In the novella, her exploration is framed in the spatialized conception of time and the externalization of the mind structure. Buildings stand out as exquisite structures that accommodate the inquiry of the soul by representing the structure of the soul in their macrocosmic physical forms. In this sense, the literary architecture in the novella mirrors the human soul by taking on an ontological mission while the structure laying dormant in the reader's mind is to be triggered to map onto the given architecture in order to facilitate a correspondence in his/her search of meaning. The story of "Life Course" thus unfolds through a revisit to the past in consciousness under the guise of the protagonist's first-time bewildering adventure into the fantastic building where he lives and into the mysterious small town secluded that is from the outside world. I will argue that the novella presents the spatialization of the protagonist's temporal experience of his life. His gradual awakening to the peculiarities of the apartment building and his move from the building to the town not only suggest his temporal progression from one stage of life to another, but also symbolize his spiritual development from an unreflective mode to a heightened awareness of his situation. This increasing awareness provokes him to search for the mysterious figure Miss Li. Through the process this search he gradually comes closer towards himself. In Can Xue's conception, this is an arduous but exciting journey into the immeasurable depth of one's soul. But the soul is not as unfathomable as it is immeasurable. By the architectural construction of time, Can Xue seeks to materialize what is intangible and locate/solidify the moment that is wearing away; while by the architectural externalization of the

microcosmic world of the psyche, Can Xue illustrates how the human consciousness is capable of performing critical self-dissection.

“Life Course” is a representative piece that demonstrates Can Xue’s spatialized vision in detail. It is densely crafted with symbols and allusions woven into its plot and characterization. The intricate interrelationships between characters are not based on conventional logic and thus are not to be taken literally without referring to the philosophical structure of the text. The following paragraphs will briefly sketch out the plot of the novella and introduce the relationships between main characters.

The story of “Life Course” revolves around the entanglements of the protagonist, Pi Puzhun in a series of strange and supernatural events. These events follow the unexpected visit to his apartment of a twenty-three year-old woman, Miss Li, who lives in the same apartment building with him. Pi Puzhun, the fifty-two year-old single man, has thereafter realized that Miss Li’s visit has instigated some unknown passion in him that propels him to pursue her. Meanwhile, he encounters a chain of similarly eccentric residents that bring him into awareness of the peculiarities of the building in which he lives. One day during Pi Puzhun’s search for Miss Li, whose whereabouts become increasingly mysterious and uncertain, he loses his way and becomes trapped in a secluded small town where everyone seems to have known him for a long time, though they treat him as an outsider. He makes acquaintances with several odd figures, who all behave suspiciously in a similar manner as the few residents in Pi Puzhun’s apartment building. Although he is cautious at first with the seemingly on-going “conspiracy” around him, Pi Puzhun later somehow learns to accept this situation and feels at home

with the town. The story ends with him reaching a new level of awareness of his circumstances under the guidance of a woman whom he works for.

Characters in “Life Course” are the typical obsessive individuals with unpredictable temperaments that appear throughout Can Xue’s fiction. Before the drama takes place, the protagonist Pi Puzhun has been living his bachelor life complacently and unconcernedly as he repeats his daily routine, which takes him from his apartment on the eighth floor to his office. His primary hobby is telling other people, usually neighbors who come for a visit, about the news he read from gossip magazines which have long been piling up under his bed. He never seems to care if his guests are often offended by his prying manner of speaking, if he is aware of it at all. Pi Puzhun’s unimpressive and unreflective life is to be transformed by Can Xue into a spiritual regeneration. Miss Li is among the first to trigger his change by rekindling his fading desire for marriage. This realization is accompanied by his awareness that his old habit of letting his thoughts run unscrupulously has become increasingly intense recently. Finally, he is not able to sleep at night since the night of Miss Li’s visit. Pi Puzhun later comes to know other strange residents in the building: Miss Li’s “parents” who are actually her uncle and aunt and have been living with her on the third floor; Old Wang, who lives with his son and wife on the seventh floor; and Old Zeng, who lives alone on the fourth floor and owns an apartment elsewhere with Miss Li. Miss Li is apparently vexed by Pi Puzhun’s obsession with talking about his determination to remain single and about his findings from the gossip magazines on her first visit and their second encounter. Pi Puzhun then turns to her parents for help, and therefore becomes accepted as one of the son-in-laws by working for the old couple every day. The old couple is as emotionally unstable as Miss Li. They

ask Pi Puzhun to learn from them to catch the fleas from their old black cat and read the stories on his magazines sometimes to entertain them. Old Wang is a crucial character in the story as it is he who reveals the secrets of the building to Pi Puzhun. Old Zeng is a rich womanizer protagonist in one of Pi Puzhun's gossip stories. In a relationship with Miss Li, he often serves as a source of Miss Li's whereabouts for Pi Puzhun. There are two primary sites in "Life Course," the apartment building and the secluded town. The above are the main characters in the first site of the story. When Pi Puzhun later begins to live in the mysterious town, he becomes acquainted with a series of people in the town. The two sites symbolize two different stages of Pi Puzhun's journey into self-exploration. My analysis here focuses on the first site since architectural constructions are the primary concern of the thesis, the characters from the second site will only be briefly discussed later into the investigation.

The apartment building in "Life Course" is the site where the story unfolds and becomes complex. It pushes the plot forward by gradually ensnaring the protagonist in complete confusion. The weird behavior of the residents and the logic that makes up every seemingly similar discordant and irrelevant speech all appear to suggest a certain connection beneath what may be directly observed. Pi Puzhun's attention to the building itself is initiated by his second visit to Old Wang's apartment. To his surprise, he notices that Old Wang's home is just a small room of only about four square meters, not what he remembers as the big room connected to Old Wang's wife and son's bedrooms the night before yesterday. This propels Pi Puzhun to wonder what kind of structure the building really has, which is intersected with his amazement at how his encounter with Miss Li has triggered something unknown inside him. Old Wang's ability to move instantly from

Old Zeng's room to another room two floors below without using the stairway further dumbfounds him until Old Wang imparts to him the secrets of the building. It happens the night when Pi Puzhun follows Old Wang into a room on the fourth floor and walks many steps upward in the dark until he feels that they have almost climbed more than ten floors above. Then Old Wang opens a door and Pi Puzhun finds himself in Old Wang's room. Old Wang tells him that when he first moved into the building, his family members were the only residents there and he was nearly crushed by the loneliness at night. So he spent every night imagining the structure of the building: the shapes of the rooms, staircases, and hallways, and the location of the bathrooms and kitchens. As Old Wang recalls, "Soon I got tired of this game, because in this way, my brain itself has become a building. When I go inside, doors and windows will open automatically. There in the empty rooms mice are running. Next to the stairway a fire extinguisher is exhaling bubbles. A tap water pipe keeps making the noise 'tongtongtong'" (*Can Xue's Self-Collection* 86)<sup>24</sup>.

Old Wang's metaphor illustrates how brain and building could be equivalences by hinting at the spatialized nature of perception. The act of "going inside" immediately complicates the issue of subjectivity as it not only spatializes the cognitive activity of self-reflection but also indicates the need to identify a specific agent of action. Who goes inside? It would be hasty to identify the "I" as the agent because, "I", the unified form of consciousness disintegrates the moment when a spatial structure of consciousness erects to let itself in. To look introspectively is thus to materialize and externalize part of what

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<sup>24</sup> All the English translations of Can Xue's fiction and critical essays in this thesis are mine.

is called consciousness into spatial constructions and personify the rest as physical people who possess the ability to transgress spatial boundaries in order to enable self-perception. The totality of the identification of the self, the material that is thought to make up consciousness is therefore broken down.

What is more disturbing about this outlook is that immaterial subjectivity splits into two parts: one is only to some extent solidified as static architecture waiting to be explored, the other also to a certain degree remains fluid, so as to be able to spatially transgress into and out of the other part. It appears that consciousness is deprived of unlimited freedom when it turns the gaze inward into itself under this conception. But Can Xue will prove that it is this tension created through this self-seclusion that pushes the self further and deeper into its inquiry into human nature. In her artistic principles, conflicts always constitute the eternal battle for self-knowledge and remain the key to elevating the struggle to a new level<sup>25</sup>. This aspect will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

Old Wang's conception of his brain as a building is to be understood in terms of the structural correspondence between the two entities. He reveals that secret passages have been multiplying year by year and that they now have almost taken up all the space inside the building: "As night falls, rooms disappear and every single corner in the building is taken by these dark narrow stairways. When you are walking on these paths, you can hear some indistinct footsteps far away. But as soon as you approach the source, the sound of footsteps would disappear. This is the secret between us three: me, Old Zeng, and Miss Li"

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<sup>25</sup> See "Kafka's Career" (卡夫卡的事业) in *Dance of the Dark Soul* and "Spirit and Body: Reading *Divine Comedy*" (精神与肉体—读神曲) in *Can Xue's Self Collection*.

(89). The secret stairways through which Old Wang and others could reach his museum and shuttle between different floors and rooms unrestrainedly are symbolic of the networks of human consciousness. Old Wang's museum that stores Pi Puzhun's stuff such as the magazines, the broken flashlight, and other things that have been either stolen from Pi Puzhun's room or discarded by Pi Puzhun himself could be seen as the locus of long-term memory. What is special about Pi Puzhun is that he is the only "outsider" to the building who has accidentally gotten involved in the secret circle of the Li, Wang, and Zeng families. Old Wang comments to Pi Puzhun that in all these years among all the normal residents, no one has ever noticed or talked about the hidden passages, even if he sometimes mentioned them in his talk. These people, according to Old Wang, only thought that he was spreading rumors and did not take him seriously. What Old Wang is hinting at in his complaints points to the problem that people seldom revisit their past experiences and simply let the memories rest permanently in some secret corner of their consciousness until they lose the access to the storage completely. "I pick up this stuff and keep them here. If owners of the stuff come to ask for them someday, I'll return them intact. But it's a pity that this kind of thing never happens. Once people throw them away, they'll never care," Old Wang says, "You're the only one who remembers what you've thrown away"<sup>26</sup> (89).

Old Wang's critique of people's attitudes towards memory reflects Can Xue's notion of time as an indispensable component in the making of identity and one's contemplation of it. Jianguo Chen's interpretation of Can Xue engages itself in the

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<sup>26</sup> Old Wang says this because Pi Puzhun remembers the piece of wood he got from a farmer which he had discarded long time ago.

discussion of time by pointing out that Can Xue's fiction is located in a *metaphorical present* in which the narrative past and imaginary future are condensed (354)<sup>27</sup>. He conceives the *metaphorical present* as "informed by a lack of a manifest historical place and time" and thus further contemplates that Can Xue's fictions "take place in a scenario of timelessness without specific topography" (354). Chen's analysis is partly based on Can Xue's speech at the International Writers Workshop in which she remarked that "I think I am a person without memory...therefore, [I] do not think of, nor even bother to think of, the past. I always think of 'the present'"(quoted in Chen 354).

Although Chen's discussion of the metaphorical present insightfully indicates that Can Xue handles the matter of time by a fictional distortion of the linearity of temporal progression, he does not distinguish in Can Xue's reasoning between a unified experience of historical time and the individual experience of one's lifetime, even if he emphasizes individual experience as a central concern of Can Xue's exploration. In his elaboration of the concept of metaphorical present, he thus does not pay attention to the wording, or clarify what he means by "timelessness" is in terms of historical time. When Can Xue mentions that she is a person without memory, she is referring to the lack of temporal and spatial markers of history in the setting of her fiction, which stands in stark contrast to mainstream realist writing. According to her interview with Laura McCandlish, Can Xue herself is not interested in relating her fiction to historical and political context; she is more concerned with personal experience of the inner world. But this does not necessarily mean that Can Xue has no concern for individual experience of time and

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<sup>27</sup> See Chen's article "The Aesthetics of the Transposition of Reality, Dream, and Mirror: A Comparative Perspective on Can Xue."

memory. On the contrary, in her autobiographical collection *Movement towards the Light: Revisiting the Spiritual Scene of Childhood*<sup>28</sup>, Can Xue expresses a deep concern for the importance of reconstructing/resurrecting childhood, the earliest time experienced by individuals.

In the preface of the book, Can Xue highlights childhood as the origin of art and only by re-experiencing childhood through the means of art could people claim a history<sup>29</sup>. She criticizes the Chinese people as having no real childhood because they never revisit the initial phase. “Certain miraculous light appears only once in one’s lifetime and then vanishes in the dark. If one does not search for her thereafter during his lifetime, it would be the same as if she never comes” (2). Can Xue contrasts the Chinese condition with the West by commenting that “Western people have always been recollecting, which is the real recollecting. So their time is full of secret passages, one after another. They revisit through literature, through painting, through each discipline. How wonderful is that performance, how natural the representation is” (1). Although she explicitly doubts the reliability of human memory, Can Xue is clearly not against temporalizing one’s conception of his/her life through the act of recollecting one’s past. Her disinterest in the collective experience of time does not prevent her from engaging actively in the philosophizing of the personal experience of time.

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<sup>28</sup> *Movement Towards the Light: Revisiting the Spiritual Scene of Childhood*(趋光运动—回溯童年的精神图景). Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> *Movement Towards the Light* is a collection of Can Xue’s biographical essays about her early life, in which she combines her reflection on her early experiences and her personality with her ideas on literary writing. The history which Can Xue talks about in the preface may be seen as more of a personal one. In the case of Can Xue herself, it is how she traces the origin and the development of her love for literature and her principles of writing through recollecting her childhood in this book.

What is striking about her perspective is the method she chooses to approach the past. She provides an alternative to what has been taken for granted as recollecting through memory. According to Can Xue, true enlightenment from childhood is achieved by recollecting through the abstract means of art. Can Xue thus distinguishes her concept of personal history by seeing it not as a natural product of time but as an intentional construction made through exploring the traces left through time. “Things from the depth are always connected by some clues with things on the surface, which I might as well call them ‘traces’. As long as you keep searching for them from the place you took off, you would eventually find those ‘traces’. At first, these ‘traces’ appear to be not what they really are. They have to be relying on your gaze at them to become time, to become your history. The world of childhood is the world of ‘traces’”(2).

The process of reconstructing one’s past thus resembles the process of solving a jigsaw puzzle. What is special about this picture puzzle is that it is not flat but is like a hologram. “I’ve come to know that the world I see is like a three-dimensional picture after a long long time. That is to say, I’ve always been seeing the world through a three-dimensionalized vision”(Movement Towards the Light 141)<sup>30</sup>. By differentiating her vision as three-dimensional, Can Xue is implying that many people observe the world in a literal, if not a reductive, way. She distinguishes the three-dimensional inner logic of her work from the flat logic and the bizarre appearance on the surface and points out imagination as the means of the gaze in order to capture the structural logic inside.

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<sup>30</sup> See “The State of Three-Dimensional Painting”(三维画的境界).

In “Life Course”, beneath all the erratic occurrences rests a deep structure of logic that reveals a path towards the reconstruction of time, and specifically speaking, towards the making of the personal history of the protagonist. The structurality of Can Xue’s interior logic thus requires a corresponding structuralization of the perception of time. As the apartment building embodies a part of consciousness, it also incarnates the perception of time by means of spatialization. The hidden passages inside the building that multiply through time echo what Can Xue suggests as the ones built inside western artists’ space of time as a means of revisiting the childhood. “Life Course” lays down a holographic puzzle about time through the textual construction of the apartment building.

The small town that Pi Puzhun enters marks his progression from a lower level of awareness into a higher level. Space again takes on a special connotation in relation to a broader framing of time. Since one’s subjective experience of time as part of consciousness can be structuralized to become physical entities in “Life Course,” its concrete spatialized representations can vary according to the conditions of the experience of time. So representation of experience can also be perceived by the category of stages. As Pi Puzhun walks out of the apartment building which represents a certain phase of transition from confusion to a certain awareness, he is moving towards another stage of consciousness marked by time. This time, the physical containment of his struggle transforms into a secluded town where every resident is engaged in pursuing a certain agenda. Pi Puzhun is told that no one in the town sleeps at night which is the liveliest time of the town. This implies that Pi Puzhun has entered a purer state of consciousness, where he still needs to figure out his situation. Pi Puzhun’s contact with several residents gradually brings him closer to enlightenment.

The first realization comes when he is asked to wait in a small tile-roofed house by a white-haired woman who claims to be Miss Li. “The old woman will not come back, it is just himself who has replaced her to occupy this house in the wilderness” is his conclusion after waiting till the next day morning (102). At the same time, he discovers that the house is not located in the wilderness but in a lively town, where he is to gradually let go of his anxiety for a way back to his former location. As Pi Puzhun begins to work for a woman who sells fish, he also starts to receive guidance from the woman through their task of making maps. There he learns to accept his situation and no longer thinks about returning. He now becomes inspired by the exercise of perceiving in the dark:

Pi Puzhun sits in the small and dim house with thoughts running on like a horse... In those thoughts, he never has once thought about returning to Wuli Street. There seems to be an invisible hand that has made a cut through his dark mind, letting in a shaft of light. He feels that he becomes gradually relaxed...the small town is all within his sight...He clearly feels that he has been living here in this town for all his life. (116)

The change in Pi Puzhun’s thinking reflects a departure from his entanglements in the past when he lives in the apartment building on Wuli Street. But still he is to be taken further in his realization of his puzzling situation. The woman questions his understanding of the word “travel” when he is expecting to travel to the “outside.” What she is implying is that travel does not necessarily mean to “go out”. This corresponds to Can Xue’s advocacy of a spiritual exploration which is directed inward. What awaits Pi

Puzhun at the end of the story is the woman's revelation about how the stages of life are to be conceived:

“There'll be one day when you will walk out of this house and keep straight forward along the street. Then you'll meet a person who sells won-ton. After you say hello to him and keep on walking, the street will disappear after you. The noise of the fire-crackers will also become indistinct. At last, you reach a new town. A yellow dog is on solemn guard at the entrance of the street.”(120)

The spatialized conception of a lifetime visualizes the fluid and intangible index of time as a series of independent but interconnected spatial containments. The map that the woman has been working on marks all the stages of Pi Puzhun's life. Now Pi Puzhun has only to accept the overwhelming fact that there is really no exit to his journey, because from the very start he has been trapped in the convoluted structure of his own consciousness. “His vision is clear. His ears are vigilant to sounds from everywhere. But his body could not move a bit. Facing the woman, he sees clearly, through her indifferent eyes, the house that has been deserted at the roadside. From the start he has been imprisoned there” (120). The abandoned house is the structuralized interiority which has long been resting inside him without his awareness. Now he discovers that he has always been regulated by an inner structure, which pushes him towards self-dissection by throwing him into utter confusion. Can Xue depicts this revelation as painfully disturbing to Pi Puzhun. As Welldellsborg has pointed out, the dreamscape created by Can Xue transforms the imagined into reality by its totality which denies the possibility of waking

up from it (25)<sup>31</sup>. Thus Pi Puzhun's situation offers no resolution to all the drama that he has experienced in the story. He has to choose to remain on his journey of life and dive deeper and deeper into his own consciousness to perform self-reflection since the woman's look tells him that he has nowhere to hide (*Can Xue's Self-Collection* 120). The only problem facing him now is whether he is ready to commit himself to the adventure.

Previous discussion has revealed that Can Xue's magical building is not a rigid structure but one that is constantly in motion with dynamic possibilities. The following section will explore another aspect of the source of the metaphorical architectural dynamism. By turning towards the residents of the building, the discussion will march further into how the idiosyncrasies of the mind translate into architecture in Can Xue's literary imagination.

The peculiarities of the building are not confined to its physical/inorganic structure. As shelter for human beings, building relates to human not only in a physical sense of containment but also in a psychological sense which derives from the former. In Can Xue's contemplation of a metaphysical architecture of the mind, the situation can be seen in reverse: the psychological turning becomes the physical. The inner dynamics of the building attest to the complexity of the mind structure even in its reflection. However, there is more inside the mind than its architectural structure. The eccentric residents of the building are an indispensable part of its composition since they act as the force that drives the protagonist into contemplation. The apartment building thus becomes more of

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<sup>31</sup> See Wedell-Wedellsborg, A. "Haunted Fiction: Modern Chinese Literature and the Supernatural." *International Fiction Review*. 32 (2005): 21-31. Print.

a spiritual dwelling than a physical shelter. The existence of these residents further suggests that the architecture of the soul entails a flexible understanding of its nature.

The eccentric residents like Old Wang, Old Zeng, Miss Li and her family are incorporated as an organic component of the dwelling since they all push Pi Puzhun to explore and reflect on the unusual features of the building. They are the personification/incarnation of the consciousness which is split between a relatively unreflective portion that presents the conscious self-identification and the portion below the surface consciousness that constantly goes against the other as a reflective agent. These characters represent the multi-faceted nature of the sophisticated soul, which incorporates the antagonism of various elements within. The idiosyncrasies of these characters thus mirror the idiosyncrasies of the mind, which is capable of self-dissection. The frequent interrogation and condemnation of the moral integrity of Pi Puzhun by these people could be seen as a form of critical reflection of oneself.

The story revolves around Pi Puzhun's search for Miss Li. She is the first to interrupt Pi Puzhun's unreflective life. To Pi Puzhun, she is what Can Xue identifies as the "certain miraculous light" to be pursued by people in an effort to revisit the past and construct a personal history. Pi Puzhun's fading sexual drive is not only a marker of his aging body, but also a signifier of his declining passion for life. His contentment with his single life precludes the possibility of stepping out of his daily routine to examine his life critically. Miss Li's appearance breaks the pattern and intrigues him to begin nighttime exploration in the building. Miss Li repeatedly emphasizes her young age as an asset. She

personifies the impulse that comes from the very early phase of life and sends out an invitation to the fifty-two year-old Pi Puzhun for a critical revisit of time.

Old Wang serves as a collector of Pi Puzhun's belongings and a guide for his spiritual awakening in the first half of the story. He collects Pi Puzhun's magazines and many things which he has lost in the past. Pi Puzhun's magazines are a frequent concern in the characters' dialogues. They function as journals that record Pi Puzhun's life. As Old Wang says to Pi Puzhun

“It is only when I mentioned it that you remembered it. If didn't, then it never existed to you. The pencil box now lies in my museum. You made a record of this on that magazine of yours. It's a pity that you were not careful when you read it and so haven't found the part till now. You have to calm down to read meticulously...Every small happening has been recorded on journals. It's a pity that you just let them go when you read. You have thrown away your history completely. But those magazines have recorded it without you knowing it. And now you can't make any sense of them at all.” (*Can Xue Self-Collection* 94)

Old Wang reveals that the magazines provide a guide for Pi Puzhun to retrieve his lost experiences. The pencil box, the piece of incense wood which an old farmer gives to him, and many other things which he has either lost or discarded are an indication of the missing components that make up one's identity. The linear temporal property of past experiences is distorted since the items that condense these experiences are displayed in a space of the present tense (i.e. the museum). The only obstacle that prevents access to

them takes the form of a spatial trick that denies direct physical transgression rather than the impossibility of temporal reversion. The unknown stairways stretching unrestrainedly inside a limited space of walls and floors frame the past in a magical sphere of the present. Old Wang's ability to move freely inside the fantastic space and his control over the access to Pi Puzhun's museum indicates his mastery of the rules of the mind structure. He is one among these residents who demonstrates familiarity with Pi Puzhun's whole life. But, unlike most of these people, he is relatively less critical about Pi Puzhun's behavior. This could be accounted for by the fact that Old Wang takes upon himself the task of transforming people like Pi Puzhun, who possesses the potential to initiate an inward adventure into the architecture of his consciousness.

However, this does not rule out Old Wang as part of the on-going "conspiracy" against Pi Puzhun. Framing this "conspiracy" in the historical reference to the political persecution and ideological control during Cultural Revolution or even contemporary China would be diminishing the sophistication of Can Xue's fiction as literature per se. The "conspiracy" reveals the extricate pattern of the dynamism within the consciousness since it is essentially an internal war that is waged by the mind against itself, in an attempt to undermine the rule of the unreflective self. If there is an ultimate plotter behind all these "conspiracies" it should be the subconscious ego that is dissatisfied with itself and pushes towards a clearer realization of existence. The interrogations by other characters to the protagonist thus become a form of self-questioning, a provocative dialogue within the consciousness. Can Xue affirms the power of the creative human mind to perform self-probation by employing architecture as an analytical tool to introduce this process.

This chapter demonstrates that what Can Xue targets at is not necessarily political discourse and its enforcement. But rather, an unreflective mode of living if only the textual context is concerned. Through “Life Course” we may catch a glimpse of how life is conceived by Can Xue and how the philosophical issue of existence is at the center of Can Xue’s aesthetics.

### CHAPTER III

#### BUILDINGS IN CAN XUE'S CONCEPTION OF THE BODY/SOUL

#### RELATIONSHIP

Chapter II emphasized Can Xue's projection of the structure of the mind into her fiction as architecture. It explored the possibility that the structuralized mind in Can Xue's aesthetic conception is may be dissected on the temporal scale. It seems that Can Xue's approach to consciousness entails a pluralist vision of the self as composed of multi-faceted and antagonistic fragments. However, it might be risky to assume that the structural self, reflected through the architecture, is total or can be traced back to the origin of a complete unity. David L. Hall's analysis of Taoism as a solution to the crux of the postmodern deconstruction of the self<sup>32</sup> is enlightening for clarifying the fundamental philosophical outlook of the current discussion. Hall is quick to reveal that although the postmodern conception of the self is illuminating in its appreciation of the aesthetic contrast and intensity derived from the fragmentation of self and in its view of the self as a temporal process, postmodernism somehow misses the point of enabling a meaningful development of the very idea of self-difference which it brings up by denying "the need for a logos, pattern, or structure that makes the self present to itself" (224). To resolve the chaos resulting from the postmodern dismantling of an interpretive system of selfhood, Hall proposes a cross-cultural recourse to the Taoist framework. While the western approach to the self builds fundamentally on a presumed wholeness that has been problematized by the postmodernist vision, Taoism is based on an analogical mode that

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<sup>32</sup> See 213-234 "To Be or Not to Be: The Postmodern Self and the Wu-Forms of Taoism" in *Self As Person in Asian Theory and Practice*. Ed. Roger T. Ames et al. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

explores the “correlation of elements with presumed similarities of structure, character, or function without the necessity to presume holistic context” (229). When discussing Can Xue’s conception of self, the Taoist method of correlativity is instructive for maintaining an open and flexible approach to Can Xue’s architectural construction. The previous chapter explored Can Xue’s building as a reflection of the structure of the soul. This should not serve to close the discussion by identifying it as the only paradigm available. This chapter resorts to a correlative perspective of an interactive relationship between body and soul to examine the significance of Can Xue’s employment of architecture. The two perspectives are related not as complementary components within an assumed totality of exploration but as correlative substances that contribute to interpretation without postulating a boundary.

Can Xue’s artistic principle is firmly grounded in an antagonism between the body and the soul, which she deems as essential to artistic creation. Body and soul, the corporeal and the immaterial, both are indispensable constituents of her metaphysical exploration. “Humans cannot live whole-heartedly in pure spirit,” Can Xue remarks, “the birthplace of the pure spirit is the very dark fleshly body of ours”(*Dance of the Dark Soul* 187)<sup>33</sup>. Can Xue does not consider the distinction between body and soul as a natural result from observation. Rather, it is a process to be perpetuated through the internal opposition within the entity of human. Can Xue spots the dynamic interaction between body and soul as a source of her inspiration. The desire to defend the integrity of the spiritual world conflicts with the inextinguishable desire for an earthly life, from which

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<sup>33</sup> See “A Special Kind of Fiction”(一种特殊的小说).

derives the intense rupture between the soul and the body. Can Xue summarizes what she has learned from her experience of years of literary creation as: “success is due to strong rationality of a writer himself/herself, which resembles a killing-machine. The greater the force of punishment by rationality, the greater the force the body rebounds with, so that the works would soar across the sky like an unrestrained horse. These works, although seem to be unfathomable, possess strict inner logic” (187). Can Xue considers Kafka as the master of this art of the splitting of the self. She investigates Kafka’s novel *The Castle* to illustrate the significance of the contradiction between the physical composition of human beings and the intangible mass that transcends physical description without transgressing the bodily boundary. The relationship between the protagonist K and the castle represents the eternal conflict between the body and the soul, which signifies the tension between the primitive and irrational drive of human beings and its rational counterpart<sup>34</sup>.

In the context of Can Xue’s architectural construction, the image of people exploring the building evokes the body/soul dynamism. The interpretation of this image can be two-fold. On the one hand, buildings as physical dwellings that accommodate humans are naturally associated with the human body which contains spiritual activities; residents with their status of being inside and their mobility thus correspondingly acquire the signification of the mind. With this allusion, the carrier of self-consciousness is identified as the residents who represent spirituality. On the other hand, however, the situation may be the reverse. Can Xue’s understanding of the body/soul relationship is

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<sup>34</sup> See “Kafka’s Career“(卡夫卡的事业) in *Dance of the Dark Soul*.

flexible. In her reading of *The Castle*, Can Xue extends the locus of self-consciousness to the castle and identifies K as the bearer of the primitive instinct that is associated with the body: “K’s behavior is not dictated by the brain but is actualized through the instinctual impulse” (*Can Xue’s Self-Collection* 549). Can Xue accords the initiative of critical self-examination to the castle by phrasing its performance as the will of the castle. K’s journey of attempting to enter the castle thus is framed as the struggle of the instinct of the body against the rationality of the mind that constantly restricts and reproaches bodily behavior. Simply put, antagonism between the body and the soul embodies a sustained progress of “becoming” towards the completeness of the self by realizing the communication between the two different dimensions. Thus, Can Xue’s notion of the self seeks meaning from both the physical and metaphysical dimensions of being as they combine to sustain self-consciousness. Buildings in Can Xue’s fiction therefore could be explored in terms of a dynamic relationship with their residents.

However, this relationship should not be understood as a dualist mind-body dichotomy. In this thesis, “mind”, “soul”, and “spirit” are used interchangeably as Can Xue herself does not distinguish between these words in her critical essays, despite the different connotations these words possess in the western context. While dualism regards the mental and the physical realms as fundamentally different and separate from each other, Can Xue views them as intertwining and inseparable, which together contribute to the self-consciousness. Even though Descartes proposes the third mode of existence, sensation, as the result of the union of the two modes: the mind and the body as its extension, his notion of the union does not entail an equal merge between the two. Marleen Rozemond has resolved the seemingly inconsistency in Descartes’ view by

pointing out that Descartes “regards sensations as modes of the mind as united to the body” instead of advocating a triadic interpretation of sensation as an independent third mode that results from the union (201)<sup>35</sup>. The nature of this mode of sensations thus differs from Can Xue’s notion of an antagonistic “merge” between the mind the body.

Buildings as carrier of the human will materialize what has been seen as the incorporeal mind, whose mobility is both limited and infinite: limited in the sense that the structure is confined to its physical sphere; infinite in the sense that by reaching out to the corporeal the mind architecture extends its potential of self-inspection. This chapter thus investigates Can Xue’s building in terms of its relationship with its residents as the relationship between the soul and the body and seeks to reveal how the body/soul dynamism is central to Can Xue’s aesthetic of literary creation.

The following discussion will be devoted to two of Can Xue’s short stories: “In the Wilderness” and “The Rainscape”. While the former sketches out the picture of two solitary beings wandering in the dark in a large house which is full of empty rooms, the latter portrays the image of a person lingering outside a granite building in search of answers to the incongruity between body and mind. Analysis of the two positional relationships between characters and architecture will demonstrate the intertwinement of body and soul and what it reveals about human existence.

“In the Wilderness” speaks of the bewilderment and pain of bodily confinement in its sensational depiction of a couple’s struggle inside a house at night. The language

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<sup>35</sup> See Rozemond’s book *Descartes’s Dualism*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998. Relevant discussion can be found in Chapter 6 “Sensation and the Union of Mind and Body” 172-213.

accentuates the pungent sensory details that evoke the imagination of physical pain. Yang Xiaobin has called attention to the frequent image of swelling in Can Xue's works. He interprets the depiction of swelling as a bodily reaction to the unreasonable violence during China's political chaos (76)<sup>36</sup>. What is relevant to the current discussion is that the emphasis on physical injuries such as swelling connotes more than physical experience of pain: to Yang Xiaobin, it is the mental trauma that has been inflicted by the dark period of persecution; but for this discussion, it is the spirit that imposes the experience of pain on the body. Rather than Yang's emphasis on what has been derived from it, physical deterioration itself may deserve more attention. In her analysis of Dante's *Divine Comedy*<sup>37</sup>, Can Xue explains the necessity for the spirit to torture the body in an attempt to transform it to better accommodate spiritual development. Pure rational performance of self-reflection is believed by Can Xue to be insufficient for reaching a groundbreaking level of self-awareness. In her view, *Divine Comedy* epitomizes the tale of the everlasting artistic struggle between the spirit and the body as it captures the beauty of the strength of both the spirit and the body in their passionate confrontation with each other. The fire that boils the bitumen of the inferno in which the bodies of the ghosts are tormented is considered by Can Xue as the art of God. The desperate revolt of the body under the tyranny of the spirit would then transform into a ferocious beast to seek revenge. According to Can Xue, it is the "body which appears in the 'adverse' role that dictates the structure of the spirit" since "the greedier and crueller the she-wolves,

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<sup>36</sup> See chapter 5 "Can Xue: Ever-Haunting Nightmares", *The Chinese Postmodernism: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction*.

<sup>37</sup> See "Spirit and Body: Reading *Divine Comedy*" (精神与肉体—读残雪), *Can Xue's Self-Collection*.

leopards, and lions are, the more complicated and developed the world created by the spirit is” (*Can Xue’s Self-Collection* 643-644). Physical affliction thus becomes a promise for spiritual enlightenment.

“In the Wilderness” substantiates the agony experienced by the body by amplifying the physical sensations when two individuals are placed under the same roof. The story starts with the wandering of the wife, unable to sleep, who discovers her husband similarly wandering in the dark one night. The two are apparently surprised and frightened by each other’s existence during night and begin to wander in the big house like two ghosts every night ever since. Their dialogues do not seem to perform the function of normal communication as they talk on completely different planes. The husband often speaks of his imagination of his physical experience outside the house in the present tense as if he was right out in the wilderness at the time. For instance, he says to his wife, “You know, at night, there is freezing rain in the wilderness. I’m rambling there, with my back completely soaked, on which freezes an ice shell. From where a stranger’s footsteps are resounding, and who is walking there?” (*A Dreamscape that has Never Been Described* 27). While the husband is fascinated by the space outside the house, the wife refuses any imagination of the outside and constantly fears what is inside, especially the big shiny hypodermic needle on the rubber tourniquet that her husband always plays with. Her anxiety resides in what is beyond immediate perception as she compares the dream that has been chasing her to a shark that devours humans.

The woman and her husband’s difference may be discerned in their attitudes towards their house. At the beginning when the husband moved in, he merrily filled up each

empty room with boxwood plants on the windowsills. But he never watered them and so he had to throw them all away after they died, leaving the empty pots looking like skeletons at night. He therefore loathes the infertility of the place and resorts to daydreaming for relief. The wife, having been living there since childhood, is content with seeking shelter inside the barren house. Her biggest concern is with her husband's eerie behavior such as chewing his rubber tourniquet during sleep. The function of the house thus is two-fold: a place of imprisonment for the husband and a protective shelter for the wife before her tranquility is ruined by her husband's intrusion. This inconsistency is at first temporarily resolved by each making his or her footsteps louder to avoid accidentally bumping into each other in the dark.

Their presence inside the building may be understood directly as souls exploring within the boundary of the body. The conflict between the two on the one hand indicates the controversy within one personality and on the other posits the impossibility of a real spiritual union between two individuals. If the husband's move-in could be seen as an act of infringement upon the independence of the other's spiritual world, the physical breakdown of the wife and the gruesome solidarity facing the husband at the end suggests how much they have risked by attempting to fit into one shell as one.

Yet the story could also be approached from the opposite side of the body/soul relationship. The sterility of the house exposes the couple's vulnerability by bringing them into a direct confrontation. In the context of Can Xue's belief in the critical power generated by the tyrant-rebel relationship of the two dimensions of being, the infertility of the building denotes a means of punishment of the two physical beings by the building as

incarnation of the rational spirit. The severity of their bodily affliction thus is to be appreciated for its rich texture of experience as a gesture of resistance. The wife's experience of fear is embedded in her perception of the tangible environment. When they are dreaming awake, she observes that "his feet stretch that long, to the extent of strangeness. An ice-cold foot palm with big knuckles has touched her pillow. One of the fingers is swelling like a carrot"(28). It is the sight of the sensational scene of corporeal disfigurement that pushes her towards her own deterioration. As she watches dark blood dripping from the needle on the wall and the rubber tourniquet convulsing and squeezing the fluid inside, the wife is transposed to the wilderness where she walks in the freezing rain with her whole body swelling and water oozing from her fingers. However, Can Xue does not describe her subjective feeling of pain on this occasion. The woman is numbed by her desire for sleep and can barely stay awake while walking. Instead, she writes, "She moves clumsily towards the groaning while dozing, tramping on one puddle after another who cry out their pain" (29). In this case, the experience of pain is transferred from the immediate subject to the environment. It indicates that bodily suffering can transcend the physical origin to afflict on the larger context that conceives its components.

"In the Wilderness" contemplates the fantastic space where the mind subsumes the corporeal with its metaphysical power of imagination. The depressing architectural space contributes to the imagination of the wilderness by igniting the bodily desire to go beyond its boundary. The wife has been resisting the temptation until near the end of the story when she is appalled by the bloody scene in the room. Her body is horrifyingly transfigured as she attempts to reconfigure the corporeal to fit into the metaphysical substance that constitutes the space of the wilderness. But she is no longer afraid of

physical punishment since it is now the nonphysical environment that feels the pain of her body. She further seeks revenge on her husband, who tortures her with his aspiration for the wilderness. Her presence in the wilderness becomes transparent as a result of her physical deterioration. She approaches the man with the sound of her footsteps. He then can no longer maintain his composure in the wilderness and cries “This is but a dream, the dream I wish!”(29). He then finds himself alone and the sound of his wife’s footstep appears only to be his imagination while “the imaginative footsteps stop by his side”(29). Although he cannot see or hear her, he still feels that an invisible hand is touching his foot toes and causing him pain.

The last paragraph of the story goes: “The wall clock breaks on the last strike. Gears fly towards the sky like a flock of small birds. The twisted rubber tourniquet sticks tightly to the dirty wall. On the ground splashes a pool of poignant back blood” (29). The ending signals the disintegration of the forward movement of time within the space of the house. Thus, the house is trapped in the eternal darkness of the night, which in turn suggests a new state of spirituality as the mind is not constrained by the clear sight under the daylight. Blood in the story does not apply to bodily injuries. The transformation of the wife’s body is accompanied by water, instead of blood, exuding from her body as a result of swelling. Only when the hypodermic injector is attached to the wall does blood appear. In this sense it seems that the body is less corporeal as the mind is less incorporeal. The transformation of both the body and the mind is embodied in the intertwining relationship between the resident and the architecture. “In the Wilderness” thus reflects on the antagonistic union between mind and body by showing how each can be transfigured in the battle against each other. At the end of the story, the boundary between the physical

and the spiritual is no longer distinct. The wife is released from her fear of physical torture and acquires a new dimension of life that is invisible to the husband while the house and the wilderness suffer from physical affliction and stops being subjected to the perception of time. The story thus recognizes the role of both the mind and the body in the contribution to spiritual exploration by concretizing the two in the relationship between architecture and people.

“The Rainscape” presents a different picture of the body/soul relationship by relating the attempt of the body to bridge the gap with the mind in terms of the experience of time. Rather than elaborating on the general confrontation between body and soul as in “In the Wilderness,” it approaches the relationship through the focal point of the perception of time. It seeks to reveal the incongruity in time perception between the two without providing a solution to resolve the difference.

The story revolves around the protagonist’s attempt to understand the grey granite building which she has been ignoring for years. The building, which is located about a hundred meters away from the window of the protagonist’s room, embodies the boundary between the physical and the spiritual dimensions of experience. The brand new golden lock hole on the small black gate in front of the building indicates how few visits to the building have been made, which corresponds with the protagonist’s years of negligence.

The protagonist’s inquiry into the mysterious building centers on what she refers to as the huge time difference between the inside and the outside of the building. As the protagonist’s exploration of the building unfolds through her reflection upon the leaving of her second little brother, the time difference leads her to ask herself the question

“When a person disappears through the wall like a shaft of light, what exactly is time to him?”(307). Her concern with the first time traveling of her second little brother stirs up the memory of the death of her first little brother unconsciously, which is realized through her first visit to the building. There she finds a person crying in the dark empty corridor who says to her, “You witnessed the happening of that event on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April” (306). But his face remains in shadow no matter how close she gets. Despite the fact that she cannot recognize him, the protagonist instinctively identifies him as her second little brother and she begs him not to leave her. The encounter ends as the man dashes out when all the doors along the hallway suddenly open. The date of the 18<sup>th</sup> April later turns out to be the date of her first little brother’s death when she asks her husband about it. Facing her husband’s surprise at her forgetfulness, she simply replies “During the night, people forget everything completely” (307).

Although the protagonist, as the first-person narrator, refrains from relating any feeling towards the loss of her first little brother, her anxiety over her second brother’s departure and her curiosity for the experience of time reveals the impact of her first brother’s death on her perception. Her forgetfulness about the date of the death and her inability to explain the time difference between the inside and the outside of the architecture suggests a state of disconnection between her and the building. The conflict between body and mind thus is embodied in the difference senses of time. The protagonist’s experience inside the building implies the lingering of the memory of her brother’s death which has been forgotten by her for years, which indicates how the event constitutes the flow of time inside. On the outside, however, she appears to have no

concern about it until the leaving of her second little brother kindles her desire to connect with the happenings which she has left inside the building.

The incongruity between her experiences of time indoors and outdoors of the architecture alludes to a conflict between the physical and incorporeal dimensions of being through the matter of time. A young couple, a tall man and a woman with a limp, who she has seen passing the building, later turn out in a second visit, to be a middle-aged man with a wig and an old man. This finding serves as a telling suggestion of the discrepancy between different chronological planes of experience. When the exterior sensation peels off, the interior is exposed to be at a disparate moment of time. The protagonist's misperception serves as an expression of the rupture between her own body and mind. As she gets close to her spiritual entity which takes the shape of the building, her observation of the signs of time transforms. Her perception of her second little brother's leaving also changes while she wonders how the two people can adapt to the huge time difference inside the building if they are not ghosts. She comes to the understanding that her brother's leaving is only a surface impression, not an essential reality as she thinks to herself: "He left by bus. But that is only the surface phenomenon, which stays in the parents' mind" (310). On the one hand, her perception suggests her acceptance of what the second brother's leaving implicitly points to: the impact of her first little brother's death on her psyche. On the other, her realization hints at the cause of the time difference between the internal mind and the external body: the lingering mental impression leads the spiritual sensation of time to develop at a different pace from the physical procession of time.

To the protagonist, mortal human beings cannot adjust to the time difference of the inside because his/her existence is realized through both of the two realms of the corporeal and the spiritual while a ghost lives through only the intangible realm. The incongruity between the two presupposes a state of conflict, which is amplified through the lens of time experience in the story. The death of the protagonist's brother stimulates her to reflect on what time means to the dead since the body ceases to be subjected to the passing of time at the point of physical disintegration. The intangible soul, in contrast, lives on according to its own rules of time.

Can Xue does not offer a closure to this state of incongruity between the bodily and mental perceptions of time. At the end of the story, the protagonist continues her wonderment at the mysterious building while facing it every day through the window. The building serves as a barrier between the two spaces, each of which runs according to its own clock. It indicates the impossibility of synchronizing the physical and the spiritual experience within an individual while revealing the corporeal desire for a more harmonious union. By bringing out this conflict through the construction of the granite building, "The Rainscape" probes into the nature of the body/soul relationship and discloses the crux of the irreconcilability between the two. Together with "In the Wilderness," "The Rainscape" explores how Can Xue's architecture functions to flesh out the exploration of various issues at the heart of human existence.

## CHAPTER IV

### BUILDING AS CAN XUE'S FICTIONAL SPACE

The previous two chapters have established Can Xue's employment of the architectural metaphor of buildings in the context of the explorations of human metaphysical existence. This chapter takes a step back to examine how buildings can symbolize Can Xue's fictional space as a whole. Can Xue uses her fictionally constructed architecture on another level to incorporate the interaction between reader, text, and author into her narrative universe. By internalizing the reading process which operates in the intermediate zone between text and people within the system of her fiction, Can Xue comments on the relationship between reader and author on a textual level and transforms her fiction into a transcription of her conceptualization of the reading process. She thus unites the two dimensions of space in embedding the extratextual mechanism into the architectural framework in her works. In so doing, Can Xue reinforces her defense of her fictional world.

Can Xue's stories often feature the plot of people visiting or entering by accident some strange buildings, which serves to accentuate the act of intruding by accident (闯入). This narrative focus on the act of unexpected entering could be traced to Can Xue's reflection on the reader's role in textual exploration with the author. As Can Xue arms her fictional space with intricate spatial structures which have been invested with deep philosophical concerns, she places heavy emphasis on readers' creative ability to break into the convoluted structure of her work to join her exploration of the human psyche. In her essays about her reflections on literary writing, she often discusses her intended

readership. She remarks that “the relationship between reader and author becomes that of collaborators during the process of extending the meaning of the works” and that “passive reading is completely rejected” (*Dance of the Dark Soul* 221)<sup>38</sup>. Although Can Xue recognizes that her works may not be accepted by the majority, she maintains hope for an increasing readership that comes from a variety of backgrounds and who are willing to follow the inner desire in themselves to contemplate on their spiritual existence despite the changing modern environment that may have forced them to lose their old beliefs and faiths.

One term Can Xue often uses to describe her potential readers is the “modern person”(现代人), which is defined as “people who always concentrate on their souls and listen to their souls” (*Dance of the Dark Soul* 196). Her wording for this term implies a determination to break through the traditional bondages of humans that have distanced people from their souls as well as an ambition to cater to a growing mass of readers in a new metaphysical context of human existence. Can Xue’s conception of the idea of “modern person” as her intended reader can be associated with her reflection on literary writing in mainland China, in which she points out the problem for mainland literary practitioners to be the lack of aspiration for personal spiritual independence (*Dance of the Dark Soul* 217-218)<sup>39</sup>. She criticizes the banal desire to embody the concern for reality in literary expression that, according to her, has little to contribute to real literary creation. Since Can Xue places individuality at the heart of the many standards for truly significant

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<sup>38</sup> See “Structure of the Spirit “(精神的层次).

<sup>39</sup> See “Great Works in My Heart”.

literature, she considers material reality which blurs individual spiritual distinction and constrains spiritual freedom as unworthy of literary exploration. What intrigues her is the world that transcends daily experience and extends beyond what may be imagined. Her elaboration reveals her awareness of the need to defend personal spiritual integrity in literary creation against the mundanization of literature that chains us to the immediately available world of the corporeal. Can Xue's defense of her fictional world is constituted by not only the elusive language and logic that permeate every line of her fiction but also the architecture that metaphorizes her fictional space in general. In many of her stories about the experiences of visiting some mysterious buildings, Can Xue provides the possibility for the first person narrator to enter her buildings while limiting his/her freedom inside the space with surrealist entrapment. Can Xue's claim that her fiction is open to all despite its strong exclusiveness (196) suggests her intention to incorporate the reader into her exploration while maintaining a certain authorial control over the textual space. By guarding her fictional space with a surreal barrier that filters out the influence of uninspiring material reality, Can Xue manages to maintain her unique mental landscape that perpetuates through her fiction.

The following analysis will focus on the short story "The Journey back Home" to illustrate how Can Xue projects the external reading process into the fiction itself by allegorizing the building as her body of fictions. As in her other stories about visits to fantastic buildings, the story adopts the first person narrator. The perspective from a bewildered visitor presumes limited access to knowledge about the house in "The Journey back Home" and serves to echo readers' experience of entering Can Xue's bizarre spiritual landscape that is not subject to everyday sensibility. By revealing the

fantastic transcendental landscape meditated within the house, the story demonstrates the potential of what the reader-author interaction can bring to the normality of the commonsensical world.

The story begins with the narrator setting out on a routine trip to a house on the edge of a large meadow on a dark moonless night. But the trip turns out to be different from the previous ones. In his past trips, the protagonist would drop by the house to have tea with the host. After that the host would see the protagonist off till a turn and then the protagonist would move on to a forest of banana trees. This time the narrator walks into a subtle situation since he/she only feels his/her way by instinct due to the surrounding darkness. By the time the protagonist reaches the house, there is no light indoors and the host confesses to him that he had been hiding the fact that the house is actually located on the edge of a cliff and that it is dangerous to light the house.

The host refers to the protagonist's entering by the word “闯入” (intruding by accident) , which alludes to Can Xue's expectation of the manner in which her readers make their way into her fiction. “The Journey back Home” further elucidates how intrusion can be realized by depicting the mental process of the protagonist when he/she makes the act unintentionally. At the beginning of the story, the narrator emphasizes his/her familiarity with the place as he/she recalls one experiment he/she has made with his/her little brother: they walked for ten minutes on the meadow with eyes closed and did not stumble. The protagonist's familiarity with the neighborhood leads him/her to take the visit for granted and expect nothing more than a brief drop-in as usual. His/her sense of security allows him/her to let down his/her rational guard and follow his/her

instincts when the surroundings are too dark to rely on the commonsensical logic of the day. Can Xue makes it clear that one difficulty facing a new reader may be the absence of the conventional objects of reference during reading. She expects the reader to turn the gaze inward to take his/her heart as the sole reference (196). When the external world loses its significance as the world of reference, the wall surrounding the internal soul dissolves and sets it free.

Can Xue sees her works in terms of not only the text itself but also the extension that results from the metaphoric connection built between texts and extratextual entities. She predicts a gradual process in which the source of metaphor will shift from the outside to the inside. What Can Xue suggests by this process is not a case of textual withdrawal from external referentiality, which constricts the horizons of her fictional realm, but instead a mode of expansion to the transcendental sphere, which is unbounded by the ideologies of the physical world. Through this process, Can Xue attempts to remove the extraneous forces that claim significance in the narrative universe and thus strengthen her control over the space. In the case of “The Journey back Home,” Can Xue sets the rule that once a person gets into the house by means of intrusion he/she will never be able to get out. When the protagonist tries to stand up and walk, he/she falls to the ground as if he/she is tripped by some supernatural force. Can Xue subsumes the architectural space under the spell of the self-regenerating impulse of her imagination that entraps the first person narrator “I”. The “I”’s entrapment is particularly manifested in the change of the landscape outside the house. As the protagonist attempts to escape by crawling out of the house, what meets his/her eyes is not the meadow but some unknown thing that keeps moving underfoot. No matter which direction the protagonist goes, he/she cannot reach

the meadow. Only when he/she arrives at the cliff does the protagonist realize that his/her previous impression of the landscape ceases to apply as a reliable referent for his/her action. That the different directions all lead to the same end suggests a state of self-containment that forbids transgression not by limiting the spatial mobility in the fictive world but by directing all the efforts to the same destination. Furthermore, the protagonist's freedom to move through space transforms into a freedom of imagination when he/she becomes trapped in the house. Previous description of the environment around the house is later replaced by the narrator and the house owner's envisioning of the landscape and events outside the house the narrator's dream and during their inconsistent dialogues.

One central topic of their conversation is the former house owner. The current host of the house tells the protagonist that the former owner who built this house must have jumped off the cliff and that the current house owner him/herself only came to the house by accident. But his/her narrative is full of contradictions and inconsistencies. According to his/her words, that the former owner has jumped off the cliff is his/her speculation. After the protagonist secretly illuminates the room with a lighter, the present owner comments on the destruction in the room after the explosion which is only observed by him/her. S/He then starts to talk about a shipwreck in which the killed fisherman might be the former owner. However, his/her conjecture then shifts naturally to an affirmation of hearsay that the owner died with his face buried in the bottom of the water instead of upward towards the house on the cliff.

After some immeasurable amount of time as the space of the house persists through everlasting night that makes the calculation of time impossible, the current host of the house begins to start every conversation with the statement that the boat of the former house owner has arrived, which contradicts his/her previous claim that the house owner has died in an accident. This capricious declaration on the part of the current owner of the house confounds the temporal thread of the story of the former house owner and expands the narrative possibility horizontally through the repetition and distortion of time as the narrative axis. It thus allows spatial development to exert greater command over the narrative flow. As the protagonist gradually frees his/her thoughts from everyday logic and synchronizes with the idiosyncrasies of the architectural space, he/she starts to participate in the imagination of what the former house owner might do when he passes by and contributes to the exploration by relating his/her trancelike meditation over the route that leads to the house. As opposed to his/her previous attempts to escape, the narrator reflects on his/her effort to search for the only road to the meadow every time he/she came for a visit in retrospect. The shift of attention from the way out of the enigmatic space to the way into it points to a significant change in the protagonist's contemplation of his/her relationship with the seemingly restraining space of the house. Moreover, the language of his/her narrative becomes increasingly imaginative and elusive. His/her recollection is mystified by his/her dreamlike experience of being chased by a flamingo which appears to be running without moving forward. The recollection ends with the narrator's conviction that there is more than one way to approach the house as he/she asks him/herself the question whether the flamingo will come.

The protagonist's perspective resembles the process by which a reader probes into the Can Xue's fictional space. The recollection of the protagonist suggests that his/her entering occurs in fact not by chance but as a result of his/her subconscious aspiration for the house. This alludes to Can Xue's idea that her works "remain open to the readers while being exclusive at the same time since they send out invitations directly to those minds who have spiritual pursuits disregard the gaps of identity, class, and so on" (*Dance of the Dark Soul* 205)<sup>40</sup>. In "The Journey back Home" the protagonist is the only one, according to the host, who enters the reflective space. The host has received many guests who merely pass by as the protagonist did before. But the protagonist manages to penetrate the invisible barrier that dissolves at night by following his/her impulse and exploring the route to the house hundreds of times. This indicates Can Xue's expectation for the reader to be persistent in his/her attempts to search for the path into her fictional space which takes the form of the fantastic buildings that are perplexing to the newcomers. Can Xue allegorizes the relationship between reader and author as that between guest and host. This conception suggests Can Xue's insistence on her control over the space in order to maintain its singularity and integrity by fending off forces of commonsensical rationality which might accompany the reader's entrance. The host's provocative power over the conversation attests to Can Xue's incorporation of her presence into the text. However, Can Xue also suggests that her presence is not supposed to be that of a dictator who exerts exclusive control over the development of her narrative. Although Can Xue declares that she only writes her story, she understands that her fiction could only exist through the process of communicating with the reader (201). Her

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<sup>40</sup> See "The Minority of Literature"(文学的少数派).

adoption of the first-person narrator corresponds with her idea that her “experience of time must be attested through reader’s experience of time” (201). In “The Journey back Home” the first-person narrator as the reader accentuates reader’s presence and presents his/her experience of the textual space. It thus demonstrates how the reader, as a visitor, can contribute to the conception of the transcendental space.

The title “The Journey back Home” is a suggestive point for reflecting on the thematic context of Can Xue’s story. The title may first appear to be contradictory since literally in the story the protagonist is trapped in a place that is away from home. By describing the protagonist’s metaphysical journey to the house as the journey back home, Can Xue envisions her fiction as the dwelling that accommodates spiritual exploration. At the same time, she also suggests that the metaphorical house should be a point of departure instead of a destination. The imagination of the protagonist and the current house owner about the previous owner who builds the house points to Can Xue’s hope that she and her reader can explore the past of humanity and thus open themselves up to new potential which will carry them further in their quest into humanity (201). In “The Journey back Home” the former house owner is imagined in relation to the sea below the cliff on which the house is located. This association is linked to Can Xue’s view of the history of spiritual exploration, as she remarks “in the spiritual realm of humans, down at the hell at the bottom, there really exists such a long river of history” (221). To Can Xue this ancient river persists through the efforts of numerous predecessors who vitalize the water with their spiritual power. The story thus frames the reader-author exploration in the historical development of the literature of the soul. As the characters picture how the former owner has died and how he has been living on as a fisherman, the story of “The

"Journey back Home" initiates a revisit to the past of the contemplative experience and revives the moments of artistic epiphany achieved by the precursors. In this context, Can Xue resigns from the position of the designer of the building and assumes the role of a host who inherits the building from her predecessor. She therefore takes the responsibility of receiving people like the protagonist who are drawn into the fantastic architectural space and guiding them to adapt to the new life inside. "The Journey back Home" thus presents the journey into the interiority of Can Xue's fictional universe by capturing the process within a visit to the building in the story.

Other stories written by Can Xue also echo this concern with the microscopic projection of the interaction between reader, text, and author into the textual construction of the buildings in her fictional space. In "The Bizarre Wooden Building" the protagonist's visit to a person who lives on the top floor of a high-rise wooden building which is erected into the clouds resembles the plot of "The Journey back Home," though is less explicitly manifested. All the puzzles around the building similarly compel the first-person narrator to think about the reasons beneath the incredible appearance. However, unlike "The Journey back Home" in which the protagonist manages to be incorporated to the transcendental space of the building, this story presents the possibility in which the protagonist fails to break through the mechanism that controls the entrance into the reflective architectural space. By providing a countering case, Can Xue demonstrates the rigor of her fictional sphere. Architecture thus assumes the role of a protective fortress that maintains the order inside while testing the strength of the intruders to determine who are eligible to enter as long-term residents. This chapter discusses the broader implication of the motif of buildings on Can Xue's fiction and

reveals how the extratextual context is embedded within the textual constitution through the employment of buildings. The significance of this microcosmic projection rests in the manifestation of the potential of Can Xue's narrative in terms of its reflective capacity on literary creation and interpretation. It complements the relative detachment in respect to the external context in the outlook of her fiction. Can Xue's motivation to render her narrative space a locus of transformation of the reading agents on the one hand demarcates the boundary of her textual realm while on the other absorbs the usually extraneous negotiating process between reader, author, and text into the composition of her fictional realm.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Previous chapters have probed into the significance of Can Xue's construction of buildings in her fiction. The first aspect has been illustrated through the representational power of the design of the apartment building in reflecting the mind structure that is entrenched in the flow of time in the novella *Life Course*. The exquisite structure of the building embodies the solidification of the fluid and irreversible axis of time in mental perception by means of spatial representation. In this process, the internally conceived human consciousness is captured in a split between an externalized architectural entity and a personified agent, which together forge the reflective power of the mind. The second aspect of significance originates from a correlative perspective that situates the metaphysical function of buildings in Can Xue's philosophical contemplation of the antagonism between body and soul by relating buildings to human beings. Discussion of "In the Wilderness" explored two possible patterns of the mapping between the relationship between buildings and people and the relationship between body and soul, which suggests Can Xue's flexibility in employing architecture to facilitate the transformative interaction between body and soul. "The Rainscape," on the other hand, focuses on the incongruity between body and soul in terms of the experience of time which is revealed through the protagonist's attempt to harmonize with the building of her mind. The last aspect of significance of Can Xue's buildings emerges when buildings are examined against the backdrop of the fictional space. Stories like "The Journey back Home" project the experience of probing into the narrative containment into a

microcosmic visit to the building within the containment and thus add another layer to the function of architectural construction in her works. This suggests a meditative attempt on the part of the fiction at conceiving its configuration on the extratextual level, which resembles a process of self-dissection.

This study of Can Xue's construction of buildings in her fiction takes a step away from the historicization of textual meaning which dominates current debates on Can Xue's fictional works. The tendency of resorting to historical context for interpretive strategies is part of the general trend which has been taking place in the studies of modern Chinese literature in the United States. Wendy Larson has noted that the wide application of a variety of approaches developed through critical theory in literary studies, such as new historicism and cultural studies, has marked a substantial move away from literary text as the essential source of interpretation<sup>41</sup>. She discerns the danger of substituting aesthetic interpretation with social and historical contextualization and advocates for a balance between the two as both allow for profound exploration of literature. This study echoes Larson's thought by exploring an alternative to the sociohistorical framing of literary text. It posits the mechanism of the text as a significant locus of meaning which is no less intricate and provoking than its connection with specific sociohistorical context. The motif of buildings manifests the aesthetic constitution of the text, from which derives the philosophical reflection on issues around human subjectivity as well as on literary creation. While sociohistorical approaches offer insightful revelation of the literary expression of human social condition by examining the text in terms of its embeddedness

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<sup>41</sup> See "Conclusion: History and Literary Aesthetics in the Study of Modern Chinese Literature", *From AhQ to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20<sup>th</sup> Century China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

in the societal context, they alone are insufficient to carry the investigation further beyond what is sensationally present in human existence realized through literature. The various textual impulses that contribute to a broad transcendental contemplation of the themes and issues concerning human experience exhibit distinct aesthetic patterns that are worth close study by themselves.

This study of Can Xue further stirs up what Rey Chow has illustrated as the problem of the obsession with “Chineseness” in the study of Chinese literature<sup>42</sup>. She observes the tendency for scholars in North America to centralize the Chinese genealogical dimension in the discussion of all kinds of issues in the field as opposed to the downplaying of area conditions in the study of western cultures. According to Chow, it is common that studies of western cultures “are thought to deal with intellectual or theoretical issues” while those of non-western ones “even when they are dealing with intellectual or theoretical issues, are compulsorily required to characterize such issues with *geopolitical realism*, to stabilize and fix their intellectual and theoretical content by way of a national, ethnic, or cultural location”(3). Although Chow’s discussion is framed in the post-colonialist context of the West versus non-West dichotomy, her critique of the essentialist practice of always channeling literary analysis through the label of the Chinese condition opens up the reflection on what is not captured in this categorization. As this study is concerned with the capacity of the literary text itself in generating meaning, it marks an attempt to reestablish the complexity of literature as an art form in order to balance the relocation of the focus in modern Chinese literary studies.

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<sup>42</sup> See “Introduction” 2-7, *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*.

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